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ABSTRACT

Suggestions for early childhood educators on how to provide developmentally appropriate practices and teaching methods are offered. Suggestions concern: (1) making decisions about entrance and placement; (2) evaluating a program's accomplishment of goals; (3) planning and individualizing curriculum and instruction; and (4) promoting appropriate policies. It is argued that the early childhood profession must agree on issues of developmentally appropriate practices; act to influence policy; and articulate standards for appropriate practice in the form of guidelines for curriculum content and assessment for prekindergarten through third grade classes. (RH)

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Protecting Children from Inappropriate Practices

Sue Bredekamp and Lorrie Shepard

Early childhood educators need to devote energy and commitment to resisting inappropriate practices for children. Policies such as using readiness testing, holding younger children out of school, or raising entrance age are at best short-term solutions, and at worst, harm children and contribute to inappropriate expectations.

All children deserve the best education possible, and schools and teachers must be accountable for providing high quality instruction and recognizing and adapting instruction when children fail to learn. But the use of standardized test scores as the predominant indicator of accountability is ill-advised. There is increasing evidence that when test scores take on too much political importance in schools, scores can go up without an actual increase in student learning (Shepard, 1989). We need alternative strategies that ensure excellence, equity, and accountability. Here are some suggestions to help guide educators in making decisions.

Making Decisions about Entrance and Placement

Avoid use of standardized tests for entry to school or promotion in primary grades.

Establish a uniform kindergarten entrance age whereby most children attending kindergarten are 5 years old and most first graders are 6. Accept children for school on the basis of their chronological age and legal right to enter.

Use valid developmental screening tests as a first step in identifying children who may need further diagnosis of a health, learning, or developmental handicap (Meisels, 1985).

Use valid standardized tests as one of many sources of information needed for a complete diagnosis of a child's special needs or the cause of a child's problem, and appropriate intervention and remediation strategies (Meisels, 1987).

Evaluating Programs' Accomplishment of Goals

Avoid use of standardized achievement testing of all children until at least third grade. When standardized achievement test scores are used in third grade as accountability measures and for comparisons of schools and districts, don't test all children; rather, use sampling to obtain the same results. This is cost effective and does not label individual children. Conduct the test in the fall of the year to prevent teaching to the test and evaluating teachers with test scores.

Develop alternative assessment instruments and procedures that can be used instead of standardized tests. These include oral tapes of children's stories or reading progress and portfolios of students' writing and artwork. Recognize that currently available standardized tests provide very limited measures of school and student success and become invalid if children are drilled on questions that are just like the test items.

Increase the use of systematic observation of teacher and student performance, and documentation of sources of evidence of children's progress for use in curriculum planning, evaluation, and reporting to parents. Increase the use of measures that assess children's strengths and deficits.

Planning and Individualizing Curriculum and Instruction

Use developmentally appropriate teaching methods to individualize instruction. For example, when children work in learning centers or in small groups on projects, ensure that the teacher is free to work with individual children and use techniques such as peer tutoring, coaching, and individual progress that use group heterogeneity as an instructional asset.

Clarify the terminology used to describe inappropriate practices. While in some ways an escalated curriculum expects too much and is too fast for the age group, in other ways it expects too little. Emphasis on drill and practice and worksheet-dictated curriculum is "shockingly unstimulating to children and fails to extend their thinking" (NASBE, 1988, p. 4). Young children can engage in problem solving before they know addition and in sophisticated reasoning and questioning about stories before they can decode words, provided that opportunities are provided in

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ways that are meaningful to children's level of understanding (Peterson, 1989).

Promoting Appropriate Policies

Encourage concerned parents to join together and complain about inappropriate practices and policies. When children's rights are violated by testing abuses, vocal parents are the most effective agents of change.

Enhance collegiality within schools and all sectors of the early childhood profession. Encourage teachers and administrators to join professional early childhood organizations.

Use the many valuable tools available to advocate appropriate practices in all early childhood programs. Some of the position statements that strongly support sound practices for young children are:

- American Federation of Teachers. (1988). "Standardized Testing in Kindergarten. 1988 Convention Policy Resolution." In *AFT Convention Report* (pp. 58-59). Washington, DC.
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (1988). *A Resource Guide to Public School Early Childhood Programs*. Alexandria, VA.
- California State Department of Education. (1988). *Here They Come: Ready or Not. Report of the School Readiness Task Force*. Sacramento, CA.
- International Reading Association. (1986). "Literacy Development and Pre-First Grade. A Joint Statement of Concerns about Present Practices in Pre-First Grade Reading Instruction and Recommendations for Improvement." *Childhood Education*, 63, 110-111.
- National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. (1987). *Unacceptable Trends in Kindergarten Entrance and Placement*. Lincoln, NE.
- National Black Child Development Institute. (1987). *Safeguards: Guidelines for Establishing Programs for 4-Year-Olds in the Public Schools*. Washington, DC.

Position statements are being developed by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs, and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Conclusion

The early childhood profession must first increase its degree of consensus about these issues, then act with one voice to influence policy. The next step in the early childhood profession's process of articulating standards for appropriate practice is the development of guidelines for appropriate curriculum content and assessment in the early childhood unit, prekindergarten through third grade. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in collaboration with the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education and other national organizations and experts, is working on this project. (Guidelines for appropriate content and assessment in the early childhood unit, prekindergarten through third grade, will be available from NAEYC in 1991.)

This digest was adapted from an article titled, "How Best to Protect Children from Inappropriate School Expectations, Practices, and Policies," which appeared in *Young Children* (March, 1989): 14-24.

For More Information:

Bredekamp, Sue, and Shepard, Lorrie. "How Best to Protect Children from Inappropriate School Expectations, Practices, and Policies," *Young Children* (March, 1989): 14-24.

Cannell, J.J. *Nationally Normed Elementary Achievement Testing in America's Public Schools: How All Fifty Schools are Above the National Average*. Daniels, WV: Friends for Education, 1987.

Meisels, S.J. *Developmental Screening in Early Childhood: A Guide*. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1985.

Meisels, S.J. "Uses and Abuses of Developmental Screening and School Readiness Testing." *Young Children* 42 (2) (1987): 4-6, 68-73.

National Association of State Boards of Education. *Right from the Start. The Report of the NASBE Task Force on Early Childhood Education*. Alexandria, VA: NASBE, 1988.

Peterson, P. "Alternatives to Student Retention: New Images of the Learner, the Teacher, and Classroom Learning." In L.A. Shepard & M.L. Smith (Eds.) *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Grade Retention*. Lewes, England: Falmer Press (1989).

Shepard, L. "Why We Need Better Assessments." *Educational Leadership* 46 (April, 1989): 4-9.

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